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# Negotiating the Networks of Space, Time and Substance: A Geographical Perspective on the Sustainable Citizen

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical geographical analysis of the emerging ideals associated with sustainable citizenship. We argue that the principles behind sustainable citizenship force us to think through the full range of geographical factors which frame citizenship and yet which are routinely overlooked in both geographical and non-geographical work on the citizen. We take the sustainable citizen to be both an epistemological challenge to existing paradigms of citizenship and a contemporary national and international policy goal. As an epistemological category we claim that the very notion of a sustainable citizen destabilizes the spatial, temporal and material parameters upon which modern forms of citizenship are based. At the same time, however, we also consider the limitations associated with contemporary national and international attempts to create a more sustainable citizenry, arguing that such initiatives often belie the radical potential of thinking about citizenship in sustainable terms. We take as our empirical focus the recently implemented curriculum for global citizenship and sustainable development being enacted in Welsh schools. Drawing on interviews carried out with education officials, teachers and students, we explore what sustainable citizenship means and the opportunities and challenges it faces as a political project.

There has always been a danger in discussions of citizenship that the modern citizen can be seen as the completion of an inexorable historical movement towards civilization, emancipation and liberty (Heater, 1990; Isin, 2002). It is in the context of such historical, or sequential, accounts of citizenship that the spatial sensitivities of geography have recently offered such a radical rupture in our understanding and approach to analysing the citizen. In essence geography forces us to look beyond the conventional historical narrative of citizenship (the transformation from anarchy to civility; from nature to civil society, from savage to “respectable” citizen) to uncover the multiple storylines which transverse this plot (tales of marginalization, social exclusion and alternate brands of citizenship) (Smith, 1989; Kearns, 1992; Painter & Philo, 1995; Brown, 1997). The epistemological contribution of geography to the study of citizenship has been manifest empirically in a changing spatial focus concerning where citizens are to be found—from the town hall to the ghetto; the public square to the private home; the city to the edge community. This changing spatial emphasis has in turn exposed a whole range of citizens and modes of radical/alternative citizenship forged around issues of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, class and religion, which

had previously been excluded from analyses of citizenship (Katz, 1993; Brown, 1994, 1997, 2000; Sibley, 1995; Creswell, 1996). While the excavation of these heterotopias, post-modern places, and *closet spaces* of citizenship is significant, this paper argues that it is only one aspect of what geography can bring to analyses of citizenship.

In his influential writings on the role of geography in disturbing the historicism of social theory and inserting a much needed spatial consciousness within the social sciences, Soja (1989, Chapter 1) reminds us that to affirm the important role of space in social life, is not to somehow deny the salience of time. According to Soja then, geography is the study of the intersections between *space, time and matter*, or to put it another way *spatiality, temporality, and social being* (p. 25). The work of Soja serves to emphasize that we have only begun to recognize the potential insights which geography can bring to analyses of the citizen and the politics and practices of citizenship. This paper utilizes Soja's triad of space–time–being as a framework for analysing a newly emerging brand of citizenship— that of the sustainable citizen. Sustainable citizenship is perhaps best thought of as a paradigm of post-industrial living. First emerging from the maelstrom of geo-economic and ecological crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the figure of the sustainable citizen has more recently been adopted by a range of United Nations and state-based programmes of reconfigured *fin de siècle* citizenship. What is most interesting from a geographical perspective about the contemporary discourses of sustainable citizenship, however, are the ways in which they not only disrupt the spatial parameters conventionally associated with citizenship (namely, the bounded communities of city, region and state), but that they also raise important questions about the temporal scope and material constitution of the citizen. If, as we argue, the notion of sustainable citizenship requires both the stretching of the spatio-temporal matrix (to distant places and past/future generations) and the material focus of being (to non-humans and various socio-ecological hybrids) conventionally attributed to the modern citizen, this paper considers how such a mode of citizenship can be absorbed, learnt and translated into people's everyday lives. Ultimately, this paper argues that while the epistemological ideal of the sustainable citizen offers an innovative blueprint for an existential citizenship of space, time and substance, the ways in which it is currently being developed, and indeed practised, is undermining many of its most original elements. In this context we argue that a geographical perspective on the sustainable citizen reveals both the great potential of this mode of citizenship as a theoretical device, but also its failings as a contemporary policy goal.

This paper begins by charting the emergence of the sustainable citizen within international protocols, national programmes of education and learning in the UK and different philosophical traditions. While having clear antecedents within various civic movements and ecological philosophies, this section shows that the notion of the sustainable citizen does offer the potential for a relationally conceived brand of citizenship for which it is difficult to find an historical precedent. Having outlined the main characteristics of the sustainable citizen, the following section introduces research which we have carried out on the Welsh Assembly Government's new *Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development Curriculum* which is being implemented in schools across Wales. Drawing on interviews carried out with education officials, teachers and young people in Wales, this section outlines how sustainable citizenship is now being learned in Welsh schools. The final section of this paper draws on the insights of the empirical case study presented to outline some of the

contradictions which lie at the heart of the notion and practices of sustainable citizenship. In this context we claim that while potentially offering a radical, (post-)cosmopolitan vision of citizenship, sustainable citizenship as it is currently being developed in the UK is being stifled by its persistent association with state-based modes of identity and learning and an unwillingness to allow this paradigm of citizenship to realize its full geographical implications.

## **An Historical Anatomy of the Sustainable Citizen**

### *Deconstructing the Sustainable Citizen in Wales*

In 2002, with little fanfare or associated media coverage, the *Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales* (the ACCAC) published a revised school curriculum guidance designed to ensure that students received the necessary instruction concerning how they could become sustainable citizens of the future. The revised school curriculum guidance was entitled *Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002) and despite its relatively innocuous launch and subsequent instigation we continue to believe that this document represents a highly significant publication.<sup>1</sup> To us the significance of this document is that it means that school goers in Wales now not only learn grammar constructions, algebra and the boiling point of water, but also how to live as sustainable citizens. The elevation of sustainable citizenship to a position alongside the established tenets of British education is an astounding achievement for a set of principles which up until seventeen years ago were nothing more than a fairly incoherent and eclectic mix of environmental philosophy and green economics. The reasons why sustainable citizenship now has such a prominent position on the Welsh schools curriculum is explained by Jane Davidson, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in Wales:

Young people today are growing up in a world where prosperity and technological progress exist alongside mass poverty and an environment under threat. Children and young adults deserve to know that their fate is inextricably linked to, and affected by, the lives and decisions of others across the world. They have a right to understand the crucial issues facing the planet and how they can personally play a part in shaping the future. (Jane Davidson, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Welsh Assembly Government, 2002)

At one level then, it appears that education for sustainable citizenship is an attempt to emphasize to young people the complex links which exist between economic growth, social justice and environmental protection. At another level, it is also clear that learning to be a sustainable citizen is about recognizing the ways in which your own economic, social and environmental decisions/actions affect distant others, often located well beyond the national boundaries within which traditional brands of citizenship have been constructed.

Although the association between sustainable citizenship and care for distant others resonates with broader discussions of post-national, global and cosmopolitan brands of citizenship (cf. Desforges, 2004; Linklater, 1998; Turner, 2000), the temporal implications of sustainable modes of citizenship, as they are now being presented in Wales, appear to be a

more original feature of its discourses. An important part of the temporal dynamics of sustainable citizenship appears to rest upon an awareness not only of the current socioecological interdependencies of different parts of the world, but a realization that the legacies of imperialism and colonial occupation mean that the actions of those in more economically developed regions of the world (like Wales) are *always already* responsible for events in less economically developed states. In addition to the historical legacies of socio-ecological exploitation remembered within sustainable citizenship, notions of sustainability also invoke a sense of responsibility towards as yet unborn generations. A representative of the Education for Sustainable Development Panel in Wales emphasized the importance of this temporal consciousness within current thinking concerning education for sustainable citizenship<sup>2</sup>:

I mean if you're asking why sustainable development and global citizenship for instance, when we were looking for our original terms of reference we came across a seminal statement that there's an imperative to do it because if we don't do it we're going to continue consuming finite world resources and eventually they will run out, then we will have major problems, so there is the pure sustainability argument that unless we do something then we are going to destroy the Earth for future generations. (Representative of the Education for Sustainable Development Panel, Welsh Assembly Government, 2003)

In this context it is clear that the imperative for sustainable citizenship in Welsh education derives from a combined concern with the legacies of global economic exploitation, currently being experienced throughout the developing world, and the social and environmental welfare of future generations.

The idea of inter-generational justice, which is being promoted within contemporary discourses of sustainable citizenship, does of course find its origins in the famous statement on the nature and form of sustainable development provided by the World Commission on Environment Development within the Brundtland Report of 1987. But this established tenet of sustainable development serves to emphasize the important role of (future) time as well as space within the constitution of all forms of citizenship (Barry, 2002). While often ignored within citizenship studies, the temporal frameworks within which rights and responsibilities are constructed, play a crucial role in defining the different rights and responsibilities of the citizen. The temporality of state-centred modes of citizenship is characterized by two key dimensions: (1) the immediacy with which citizens exercise rights and responsibility; and (2) the application of rights and responsibility with regard to your current (often national) community. Thus, while the rights and responsibilities which you may have (for example, paying taxes, voting, claiming pensions and social security, military service, and so on) can vary according to the stage you are at in your lifecycle, they are still articulated around living subjects and realized in the contemporary political community (see Roche, 1992; Norton, 1999). The ideals of sustainable citizenship challenge these basic political assumptions. Suddenly there is a sense of obligation towards both past and unborn generations, the articulation of rights for subjects who do not (yet) exist.

The inter-generational as well as international character of sustainable citizenship is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's (1958) vision of a trans-temporal public sphere, erected not

only for the living, but which transcends individual life spans to incorporate future (and past) generations (see also Arendt, 1961). The stretching of responsibility through time suggested within the discourses of sustainable citizenship does, however, raise difficult question regarding the basis on which current citizens can be held responsible for the lives of other generations. While at one level it is relatively easy to understand how contemporary actions (particularly with regard to environmental destruction) will affect future generations, it is more difficult to comprehend the relations of responsibility which exist between living citizens and past generations. The work of Gatens and Lloyd (1999) has, however, explored the grounds upon which notions of responsibility can be extended back in time (for an interesting discussion of the work of Gatens & Lloyd, see Massey, 2004, pp. 9–10). Gatens and Lloyd argue that “we are responsible for the past not because of what we as individuals have done, but because of what we are” (1999, p. 81). According to Gatens and Lloyd, our responsibility for forms of social injustice in the past (perhaps with regards to racial prejudice, colonial exploitation, or imperialism) does not emanate from our active engagement in these actions. We are instead complicit in these relations of exploitation because of what these processes enable us to be (perhaps racially privileged, affluent citizens of Western states for example). Our responsibility is thus twofold: (1) to recognize the historical relations which have informed contemporary patterns of social injustice and exclusion; and (2) to act to address these often profound inequalities which under-gird who we are.

What is clear in relation to the brand of sustainable citizenship currently being promoted within the Welsh education system is that it requires an enlargement of the public sphere within which citizenship is conceived of and then practised. The stretching of the public sphere in this way clearly involves taking account of planetary issues as well as an active consciousness of both past and future socio-economic relations. There is, however, a third dimension to this stretched, or *distanciated*, mode of citizenship associated with contemporary discourses of sustainability. This is the aspect of sustainability concerning environmental rights and responsibilities. The relationships forged between citizens and their environments are of course crucial factors in determining whether citizenship practices are sustainable are not. In this sense, the environment is a both a crucial socioeconomic resource upon which the present generation depends, but also one of the most direct mediating object which connects the present with the past and the future (Latour, 1993). While the treatment of the environment within the sustainable development movement has largely been constructed from an anthropocentric perspective (cf. Naess, 1994), it is clear that to talk of sustainable citizenship is to talk of a branch of citizenship with a particular sensitivity to environmental issues. Consequently, while discussion of the environment within the discourses of sustainable development frequently refers to the role of the environment in securing social stability and economic growth, it is clear that within the principles of sustainable citizenship that the environment itself become a crucial factor in political decision-making of every kind. If we look again at the new curriculum for sustainable citizenship in Wales, we can see the links which are being forged between the environment and the citizen. The new curriculum states that three of the key principles for sustainable citizenship education are:

*Interdependence*—understanding how people, the environment and the economy are inextricably linked at all levels from local to global; *Stewardship*—recognising the importance of taking individual responsibility to make the world a better place; *Diversity*—understanding, respecting and valuing both human diversity—cultural, social and economic—and biodiversity. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 9)

In this context it appears that the environment is an issue for sustainable citizens to the extent that they must be conscious of the interdependence of society and nature; the importance of social care or stewardship for the environment; and also respect the value and utility of biological and ecological diversity. We argue then that through its enduring concern for environmental care sustainable citizenship at least promises a new trans-ecological public sphere within which the rights and responsibilities of humans are co-joined with the non-human (M. Smith, 1998; Curtin, 2002). This broad forum of citizenship, forged across the interstices of substance, reflects what Latour has described as a “common humanity”, within which the non-human is not interpreted as the *inhumane*, but as that which is central to making us human in the first instance (Latour, 1998, pp. 230–231).

To summarize then, even from our cursory reading of the new curriculum for *Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship* in Wales, it is possible to discern the key anatomical features of the sustainable citizen. A sustainable citizenry is essentially a trans-human community of being which crosses time, space and substance. In this sense, sustainable citizenship can be thought of as a form of *unbounded* and *relational* citizenship—unbounded to the extent that it challenges the traditional spatial, temporal and subjective boundaries of citizenship, and relational in the sense that it requires a keen awareness of the connections which exist between social actions, economic practices and environmental process. While citizenship has to an extent always been a relational process—concerned with the acts of virtue, rights and necessary political practices of an individual acting in the political community within which they live (whether it be the *polis*, *agora*, or *nation state*)—it is clear that the relational constitution of sustainable citizenship is of an altogether different order. It requires a much broader consciousness of the relational implications of various socio-ecological practices—including the way you vote; the environmental impact of the car you drive; the trading arrangements behind the goods you buy; and the energy efficiency policies of your place of work. One consequence of this relational ethic is of course to challenge the increasingly fragile distinction which is made between the public and private spheres (or *polis* and *oikos*), and which continues to inform certain sections of citizenship theory (Dobson, 2003, pp. 51–56). It is clear that within the ideologies of sustainable citizenship, the confinement of citizenship to the formal public spheres of politics (voting for the Green Party; lobbying for environmental reform; taking affirmative action for social justice) becomes increasingly difficult to justify, as the practices which mark out the sustainability of the citizen spill over into a range of domestic spheres and practices (cf. Dobson, 2000, 2003).

## *The Philosophical and Historical Roots of the Sustainable Citizen*

So far our discussion of the sustainable citizen could be interpreted as an attempt to excavate a radical and as yet uncharted branch of citizenship. But despite its original feel, the figure of the sustainable citizen is clearly a product of a complex genealogy of political policy and socio-ecological philosophy. At a national level in the UK, it is clear that the contemporary emphasis on education for sustainable citizenship in Wales has been influenced by a broader series of political attempts to re-invigorate the notion of British citizenship which have been evident from the 1990s onwards. Following the purported erosion of British society and civic values under the Thatcher administration (Mohan, 1989), the 1990s witnessed a concerted political attempt to re-invent British citizenship. Starting with the consumer-rights-based citizenship of the Major government's *Citizens Charter*, the rediscovery of a sense of British citizenship has subsequently become central to New Labour's attempts to *re-invent social democracy* in the UK. It was as part of New Labour's attempts to re-invoke a more politically engaged and caring society that citizenship studies first appeared on the English National Curriculum for schools.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to reflect upon the stated goals which the New Labour government has established for citizenship studies in English schools:

*Social and moral responsibility:* Pupils learning—from the very beginning—self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour both in and beyond the classroom, towards those in authority and towards each other. *Community involvement:* Pupils learning about becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their neighbourhood and communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community. *Political literacy:* Pupils learning about the institutions, problems and practices of our democracy and how to make themselves effective in the life of the nation, locally, regionally and nationally through skills and values as well as knowledge—a concept wider than political knowledge alone. (Department for Education and Skills, 2004)

What is interesting about the vision of citizenship which is being promoted in England is how it differs from that now being pursued within Wales. In England it is clear that citizenship is being presented as an issue of local community involvement and participation within the formal realms of national government (particularly through voting). While this vision of citizenship clearly reflects the emphasis which New Labour has placed on the importance of regenerating local communities in the UK (Imrie & Raco, 2003), it makes little connection between citizenship and issues of sustainable development. It is consequently interesting to note that when revising the Welsh National Curriculum to take account of the new emphasis on citizenship-based learning being promoted in London the newly formed Welsh Assembly government should focus in particular on sustainable citizenship.

While notions of sustainable citizenship do emphasize local community support and involvement (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, pp. 11–12), as we have already seen they also entail a much more broadly drawn vision of community than those being promoted in England. Our analysis indicates that the emphasis placed on sustainable development and global citizenship in Wales is the product of two factors: (1) the statutory responsibility bequeathed on the Welsh Assembly Government to incorporate sustainable development in



to all of its activities (cf. UK Round Table on Sustainable Development, 1999); and (2) a desire to develop a distinctive brand of citizenship which recognizes Wales' place in the world, not just in the UK. In this context, it is clear that to teach about sustainable citizenship in Welsh schools is to promote a new brand of post-national citizenship, which serves to re-enforce the growing significance of the fledgling Welsh government.<sup>4</sup> This idea of nation-building—which is based not so much on the internal, territorial integrity of the Welsh nation, but on the external global influence and role of Wales in the wider world—serves to emphasize the link which has consistently been made between the principles of sustainable citizenship and cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan citizenship is fundamentally different from state-centred, or territorial, brands of citizenship politics because it is not based upon the practices of exclusion, partiality and discrimination (that is, politically demarcating who has certain rights and who does not; who is a citizen and who is an alien; who is on the inside and who is outside), but on an expanding sense of inclusion, impartiality and non-discrimination. The expanding sense of political inclusion associated with cosmopolitan visions of citizenship is perhaps best conceived of as a form of world, global, or planetary citizenry, which transgresses territorial boundaries and state authorities (cf. Linklater, 1998, 2002). It is clear that the emphasis which cosmopolitan ideals of citizenship place on the relational responsibilities which exist between citizens in global space mirrors many of the principles espoused within the discourses of sustainable citizenship currently being promoted in Wales. But a closer look at notions of cosmopolitan and sustainable citizenship does reveal some interesting distinctions.

Linklater (1998, 2002) argues that what distinguishes cosmopolitan citizenship from acts of international benevolence is a clear code of political conduct which emphasizes the importance of global dialogue (see here also D. M. Smith, 1998). The idea of cosmopolitan dialogue suggests the creation of a democratic realm within which force is replaced by mutual consent within international decision-making. While this commitment to the creation of a global public sphere of democratic dialogue appears to echo the sentiments of sustainable citizenship, it is the nature of this commitment which actually most distinguishes the two forms of citizenship. While as we have already seen there is a strong emphasis within current systems of education for sustainable citizenship in Wales on the importance of taking account of other more distant world citizens within socio-ecological and economic decision-making, it is clear that notions of sustainable citizenship pay far greater attention to the actions and practices of citizens, than to the establishment of international dialogue. Given this distinction we believe that as it is currently being constructed, sustainable citizenship has more in common with what Dobson's (2003) has recently described as a post-cosmopolitan brand of citizenship than it does with cosmopolitanism.

Despite its rather misleading (and also regressive sounding) name, post-cosmopolitan citizenship supports the idea of a globalized citizenry, but it does so not on the basis of abstract human rights and universal principles of dialogue (as with cosmopolitan citizenship), but in the context of the socio-ecological obligations which have arisen as a result of the historical unfolding of globalization (Dobson, 2003, p. 81). In this context, post-cosmopolitan citizenship is premised on recognizing international socio-ecological obligations and the mechanisms through which these obligations can be acted upon. According to Dobson, the most obvious expression of post-cosmopolitanism in the world today is that of "ecological citizenship".<sup>5</sup> Ecological citizenship is one of two dominant

paradigms of citizenship which have emerged from the modern green movement (the other being “environmental citizenship”) (Dobson, 2003, Chapter 3). According to Dobson, while environmental citizenship is focused upon claiming certain (neo)Marshallian-like environmental rights (such as the right to clean air and water), ecological citizenship is based upon a broader realization of ecological responsibility. While sharing the same trans-territorial consciousness as the cosmopolitan citizen, Dobson (after van Steenberg, 1994) argues that ecological citizens are best conceived of as *earth citizens*, or people who do not simply think and talk at a global level, but also recognize the global socio-ecological impacts of their actions. Consequently ecological citizenship is about the politics of inter-connection (ecologies), or the way in which an individual’s actions impinge, transform and alter the environments which they are able to affect.

While ecological citizenship has much in common with sustainable models of citizenship, they are also distinct. The key difference between Dobson’s (postcosmopolitan) vision of ecological citizenship and the ideals of sustainable citizenship are their respective treatments of the non-human world. According to Dobson, ecological citizenship must be understood as an anthropocentric movement, because to talk of the rights and responsibilities of nature and the non-human world is an issue of moral debate not citizenship. In this context, Dobson (after Norton, 1991) argues that the duties of the ecological citizen towards the non-human world can be achieved through a political dedication to care for future generations—which by extension would require the handing on of a healthy and sustainable environment (p. 112). The fundamental rationale underscoring Dobson’s position on the role of the non-human within citizenship debates is his belief that citizenship is essentially an issue of communities of justice, and as the decision to be just is a fundamentally social concern, any community of justice must be a human one (p. 113). The problem we have with Dobson’s vision of an exclusively human citizenry is not so much derived from his view of the non-human world, but his assumptions about the figure of the citizen. Implicit within Dobson’s view of ecological citizenship is an assumption that the citizen predates the various bio-ecological processes which enable citizenship to even be conceived of in the first place. In this sense Dobson reasserts a divide between humans and animals (Gray, 2002), the cultural world and the world of objects (Latour, 1993, 2004) and between society and nature (Whatmore, 2002), which has been an organizing, and highly misleading principle of the whole modern era. Our point is that if to talk about citizenship and justice requires the exclusion of the non-human world, it does so precisely because the very concept of citizenship (along with related notions of civilization, state and city) have been forged and consolidated within a thoroughly modernist mindset. Yet we assert that citizenship (understood as a community of rights and responsibilities and duties and virtues) has always been an emergent feature of socio-ecological negotiation—a struggle in and through the human and non-human world. Often this process of negotiation has been characterized by the use of the non-human/animal as the oppositional category in and through which human rights and responsibilities are realized and those without such rights identified. To recognize this not only exposes the citizenly relations which exist between the human and non-human world (understood as both the living and non-living), but also reveals the agency of nature within any community of citizens.

It is only when we start to think of sustainable citizenship (at least in a fully fledged sense) as an open, or hybrid form of citizenship, which connects different spaces, times and facets of

substance, that the potential benefits of a geographical perspective on the sustainable citizen become apparent. As a discipline which has always concerned itself with the intersections of space, time and being, recent work in geography has explored the different social, economic and ecological relations which constitute different spaces. In this context, geographers have become increasingly suspicious of notions of geographical community which understand communities as eternally bounded spaces which can be found out there, somewhere (cf. Amin, 2004; Massey, 2004). Instead geographers now argue that geographical communities should be understood as relational spaces, composed of myriad networks of socio-ecological flow, stretching across various global and local scales (Whatmore, 2002). To be citizens within such communities (of justice) is not a matter of having pre-given, eternal rights, but about negotiating your way through, or learning to be in, this complex set of relational spaces. In this view of community it is not so much that citizens deliberately *do things* across time, produce space, or *create ecological footprints* (to use the language of Dobson), but that the social agency of the citizen is always a “precarious achievement”, realized in and through various social and ecological actors and things (Whatmore, 2002, p. 4). In this sense of community, it is not simply that we are responsible for the non-human world, but that it is this world that makes citizenship possible. This form of geography suggests a commitment to understanding communities of citizens not so much as *being* but as *becoming*—as complex webs of evolving relational spaces. It is in the context of this form of geographical understanding of communities of citizens that we wish to interpret the emergence of the sustainable citizen in Wales, and to ask whether this manifestation of sustainable citizenship will be able to escape the limitations of its antecedent regimes of citizenry community.

### *Learning to Be Sustainable—Delivering Citizenship Education in Welsh Schools*

Since the publication of the new curriculum for *Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship* in Wales in 2002, education officials have been busy trying to ensure the systematic implementation of curriculum reform in line with the principles of teaching sustainable citizenship. The implementation of sustainable citizenship education has been supported by the recent publication of a support document—*Education for Global Citizenship in Wales* (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004) and the production of guidelines for assessing and evaluating the teaching of sustainable development and global citizenship in schools. Two clear strategies have emerged for the delivery of sustainable citizenship in Welsh schools. The first is that students should learn about sustainable citizenship education through geography classes and *Personal and Social Education* (PSE) courses. Given what has already been said in this paper, the use of geography as a delivery mechanism for sustainable citizenship education should come as little surprise. It is, however, interesting to notice how changes in the emphasis of the geography curriculum are enabling a greater focus on issues of sustainability and global citizenship. The new geography entry in the National Curriculum in Wales states that:

They [students] should develop their knowledge and understanding of a wide range of people, places and environments and their understanding of the changing nature of geographical patterns and processes over time and space [. . .] Pupils should be given the opportunity to describe and account for the changes brought about by

linkages and interaction in human and physical geography. They should be taught to understand how changes affect people's lives, their attitudes and values, including their own, thus leading to geographical issues and decision-making which impacts upon the quality of life for present and future generations. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2000, p. 7)

In this context geography teachers in Wales are now being encouraged to teach on geographical themes which introduce global issues and international spaces, and to emphasize notions of socio-environmental interdependence and inter-generational justice which are the cornerstones of the discourses of sustainable citizenship.

One good example of the changing emphasis on global citizenship within geography is a project exploring stereotypical images of Africa developed at Cathays School in Cardiff. While focused upon the traditional ethos of place-based learning which has historically been associated with geography, this project seeks to challenge the geographical stereotypes which are routinely produced in the Western media and to encourage students to develop their own more carefully informed opinions about distant others. The teachers describe the project in the following way:

As part of a unit of work on Kenya, pupils examined the stereotypes they held of life in Africa [ . . . ] They discussed where their information on Africa came from and why they had developed the stereotypes. Most pupils put charities (particularly Comic Relief) and disaster reports as their main sources. This introductory exercise was followed by research using a wide range of resources from OXFAM including videos, books, maps and photographs. (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 22)

It is clear from projects like this that the association which is being made between citizenship and geography in Welsh schools is encouraging students to not only learn and absorb curriculum-based geographical knowledge, but as active citizens to learn the skills needed to construct their own forms of geographical understanding and socio-ecological consciousness.

The second strategy which has been used throughout Wales as a way of delivering sustainable citizenship teaching and learning has been what is called *a whole school approach*. The basic principle of the whole school approach is that sustainable citizenship cannot be taught effectively in a traditional classroom environment. In this sense students are encouraged to deliver practical projects through which the school can itself help to achieve sustainability within its own grounds, the local community and the wider world (cf. Welsh Assembly Government, 2004, p. 13). The idea of a whole school approach was explained to us by one teacher in the following way:

I think, well I very strongly believe that schools should be very extreme examples of sustainable development, they should be sustainably built and be as energy efficient as possible and also students should be shown that recycling is a very valid option and so there shouldn't be really anything thrown away at school. If students do that at school and then see that the building is very energy efficient and see how much good it's doing they might take those ideas home, because young people are

definitely affected a lot by school, even maybe subconsciously, and so I think if they saw that as an example, then that would, well at least maybe show them that there was an option to how maybe their parents have brought them up, and they would take that further into their lives. So I think schools should be very extreme examples of sustainable development. (Welsh school teacher, 2003)

So far the idea of the whole school approach to sustainable citizenship has led certain schools to establish sustainability committees which oversee school-based recycling projects, while others have created partnerships with schools in Africa and have developed fundraising schemes to assist African communities which have been ravaged by AIDS (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, pp. 9–28). Although the whole school approach to sustainable citizenship obviously encourages innovative local initiatives, the Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn) recently produced a set of guidelines for teaching and learning about sustainable citizenship (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002, p. 29). The aim of these guidelines is to ensure that there are uniform standards of teaching and learning for sustainable citizenship in Wales, and that where good practice exists it is shared among schools.

### *Analysing Sustainable Citizenship Education in Wales: Some Geographical Paradoxes*

The remainder of this paper presents research which we have carried out with education officials who are responsible for delivering sustainable citizenship education in Wales and the students who are receiving this new brand of teaching.<sup>6</sup> One of the most important insights which emerged from the research which we carried out was the strong association which Welsh policy-makers and education officials made between the figure of the sustainable citizen and nation-building in Wales. As we have already mentioned, the emergence of education for sustainable citizenship in Wales coincides with the creation of a newly devolved government structure in the region. The creation of the Welsh Assembly Government in April 1999 marked the beginning of a new era of Welsh politics, with the Welsh Assembly adopting power over education, health and other key domestic policy arenas which had previously been controlled in London. While the creation of a Welsh Assembly Government should not be interpreted as the first step towards Welsh political independence from the UK, for many it does represent an opportunity to reassert Welsh cultural identity and political values. Central to this project it would appear is the creation of a new breed of Welsh citizen. One education advisor recognized an important association between Welsh political devolution and the creation of more sustainable citizens in Wales:

I think one of the beauties of devolution is that any new country at a given point is given the opportunity to develop their own political structures, you know, takes a kind of critical view of a slot in time of where are things, and what's happening and what are the factors that shape us economically, politically, socially you know just a kind of overview of where we are; and for the Assembly to look in at 1999 or the sort of the build up to that setting, so what are our structures what is important, the fact is that in that time slot, having sustainable development, having equal opportunities for social inclusion as two themes that go across all of the assembly is saying something about a moment in time [. . .] the education system is a very important

part of shaping the citizens of this nation of Wales, which we want to be underpinned by certain values, so then those need to come through but I think its something about that, you know the devolved government has taken a look and continues to look around and engage with the wider world [. . .]. (Member of Welsh Assembly Government Panel on Education for Sustainable Development and Welsh Assembly Government Working Group on Global Citizenship, 2003)

As we discussed earlier, while the idea of forging a brand of Welsh citizenship which is outward looking and inclusive is an interesting and even progressive alternative to antecedent brands of Welsh identity, the strength of the association between Welsh national citizenship and sustainable citizenship does raise some important issues. The idea of the sustainable citizen emerging as the citizenly vanguard of a *new country* does tend to run contrary to existing models of cosmopolitan citizenship. While conventional discourses of cosmopolitan citizenship challenge the value and validity of nationally bound communities, it is clear that in Wales the figure of the sustainable citizenship is being used at least in part to mark out a new political territory, albeit one which is recognized by its purportedly global consciousness. In this context it is interesting to note that while the current curriculum of education for sustainable citizenship emphasizes the links between Wales and other European and World countries, there is nothing on the important socio-ecological and economic link between England and Wales. This is perhaps significant given the fact that Welsh national identity has, it is claimed, historically been threatened through its association with England, and associated forms of Welsh nationalism often unified by an active opposition to English cultural and political influence. There is therefore in our opinion a real danger of an exclusionary politics of boundary formation typical of state-centred models of Westphalian citizenship emerging as part of the creation of the Welsh sustainable citizen.

The peculiar spatial geometries of the sustainable citizen in Wales are further complicated by the attempts which are being made to create an homogenous national curriculum of citizenship education throughout Wales. The goal of delivering a nationally prescribed programme for citizenship education across Wales was recently confirmed with the publication of a (draft) National Support Strategy (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004). Within this support strategy the Welsh Assembly Government discussed the importance of national coordination (through *regional fora*), the provision of teaching and learning resources, and the careful monitoring and evaluation of sustainable citizenship education throughout Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2004, p. 29). It is clear, however, that those working within Welsh education are conscious of the dangers and difficulties of developing an integrated Welsh curriculum for sustainable citizenship. One education officer observed:

I think we'd have a philosophical debate about these aspects of the curriculum content driven to the extent that you would want a prescribed programme of study for global citizenship you would want to say you know all schools must teach about you know the class system in India, about the roots of Islamic fundamentalism, you know, have a sort of programme of study. So is it that sort of area of the curriculum at all, ultimately we're trying to develop, to make it more generic. (Welsh education officer, 2003)

It is clear that the type of generic, prescribed curriculum for sustainable citizenship which is currently being developed in Wales could undermine many of the most valuable attributes of sustainable citizenship education. First, while a generic curriculum is valuable in terms of educational attainment targets and assessment comparison, it undermines many of the practical qualities associated with the sustainable citizen. The issue here is that to choose, in a very general sense the curriculum content for sustainable citizenship education—perhaps the Indian caste system, Islamic religious beliefs, or French colonial ties to North Africa—tends to produce a very abstract and arbitrary set of values. It suggests that to be a good sustainable citizen, you need to have certain types of political and historical knowledge. Of course this reification of certain forms of knowledge undermines the practical nature of sustainable citizenship, or an appreciation of the ways in which individuals' own actions affect the environment, distant others and future generations. In this context, it would seem more appropriate to develop very localized curricula, within which children could understand the actual relations which exist between their communities and other parts of the world. In this sense, understanding the economic links between certain Welsh communities and parts of the developing world, or the commodity chains through which a school canteen or automatic food dispenser had been supplied, would appear better suited to emphasize the *affective* nature of sustainable citizenship than a generalized curriculum.

The tension between teaching standardized visions of sustainable citizenship and more geographically embedded notions of the sustainability does raise the question of whether schools are really the most appropriate places to instigate a more sustainable citizenry. The recourse to school education as a means of developing the ideals of sustainable citizenship is hardly surprising given the long historical association between schools and the promotion of state-based ethics of civic belonging and responsibility. But the virtue of the school as a basis for the generic promotion of civic values is in itself a problem when it comes to sustainable citizenship. The homogenizing tendencies of school-based learning tend to result in the standardization of teaching around nationally conceived boundaries and educational institutions. However, the cosmopolitan (and post-cosmopolitan) characteristics of sustainable citizenship are values and principles which do not lend themselves to nationally prescribed modes of learning and assimilation. Beyond restricting the types of sustainable citizenship which it is possible to promote, there are other limitations associated with a school-based system for promoting sustainable citizenship. One school student described to us the tension of teaching sustainable citizenship on an already crowded national curriculum:

Well I'm not sure, it's a bit of a sort of vague word that can be used to mean a lot of things. I see citizenship as, well talking in educational terms, as teaching people how to sort of be a member of society and to act as a good member of society. I mean that's just my view of it, I'm not sure what everyone else thinks [. . .] but it doesn't really happen at the moment because everything is focussed on exams, getting a good grade in English, getting a good grade in maths, and citizenship isn't going to help you do that really and even when there is time on the timetable, maybe like an hour every fortnight or something, then the teachers don't see it as very important, so they don't put much effort into it, maybe they put a video on, then they have an

hour free for doing some marking or something. Yeah, that needs to be improved.  
(Welsh school student, 2003)

As long as citizenship is taught in schools, there remains the danger that alongside core examined subjects, like maths and English, its relative importance will be persistently diminished.

A final problem with school-based systems of education for sustainable citizenship relates to the apparent distinction which formal education can create between public learning and private actions. As the opening section of this paper attested, if sustainable citizenship is interpreted in its broadest sense, it is a brand of citizenship which stretches the spatial, temporal and material bounds of citizenship. In stretching the conventional bounds of citizenship, a sustainable citizenry is one which does not recognize the historical divide erected between the public and private spheres. As Dobson (2000) recognizes, sustainable citizenship is a form of citizenship which is practiced every waking minute of everyday. Students currently participating in the sustainable citizenship curriculum in Wales, however, feel that being introduced to issues of sustainable practice and ethics in school tends to segregate citizenship into discrete acts of public learning. Related to this, some school students recognized that the competitive and often alienating experiences associated with attending school mean that schools are inappropriate contexts within which to develop the types of moral lifestyle education which has conventionally been confined to the home:

I think it is really hard trying to balance out the sort of conflicts of emotions though because sort of everything in the outside world is saying you know just care about yourself and your ego and not the environment, and who cares if you know the coffee your drinking has come from an Ethiopian farmer or whatever, and then you have the total other extreme and trying to sort them out is really very hard [. . .] Yeah, because I see it as a sort of difference between school and home. Because at home my parents have brought me up, well sort of brought me up to be the way I am, and the sort of emotions and ways they've taught me to think at home are so completely different to what I experience at school its really hard to try and work out which way I'm going. (Welsh school student, 2004)

It appears that while schools may provide an appropriate context for many brands of teaching and learning, they do not offer the broader moral context required in order to foster the development of more ethically engaged sustainable citizens. This tension between the learning structures of a school and the moral support of the home illustrates how difficult it can be to try and develop new brands of post-national, (post-)cosmopolitan citizenship within institutional and discursive frameworks which are still predominantly national and state-based in nature.



## Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that work on the links between geography and citizenship has only just begun to realize the full implications of an integrated geography of citizenly relations. We claim that as a discipline which is concerned with the intersections of space, time and substance, geography serves to remind us of the complex spatio-temporal and material relations in and through which communities of citizens are constituted and transformed. In light of the connections between geography and the study of citizenship, this paper has explored the ways in which the contemporary emergence of the sustainable citizen necessitates a broadly devised, integrated and geographical understanding of citizenship. Through an analysis of the emerging characteristics of sustainable citizenship—as it is now being expressed in the Welsh education system—this paper has illustrated that geography's disciplinary agenda(s) is well suited to analysing the complex relational dynamics of the sustainable citizen and to expose the nascent failings of this brand of citizenship.

It is clear from this paper's analysis of the anatomy of the sustainable citizen that while sustainable citizenship has varied historical roots, its particular post-cosmopolitan, transspatio-temporal qualities and relational dynamics mark it out as a particularly innovative expression of fin de siècle political community. Analysis has, however, also revealed that while promising a new geography (understood in its broadest spatio-temporal and material sense) of trans-territorial citizenship, the sustainable citizenship is still subject to key forms of geo-political inertia. By geo-political inertia we mean that while the figure of the sustainable citizen offers a radical vision of future modes of citizenship, it is still being developed and conceived within the bounded spaces of old (and new) nations, and instigated within the formal realms of public politics. In the case of Wales, attempts to instigate modes of sustainable citizenship through the school education system has led to a situation whereby rather than offering a radical vision of global, "affective" citizenship, the sustainable citizen is being forged within the bureaucratic realms of the *shadow* or *ideological state*. In this context it is clear that trans-spatial visions of citizenship have collided with a nascent politics of civic republicanism in Wales, and relationally conceived understandings of the uneven affective socio-ecological capacities of the citizen are competing with standardized curricula designed to teach about the ideal citizen.

We argue that the current spaces within which sustainable citizenship is being developed in Wales are inhibiting the emergence of this brand of citizenship. To put it another way, the geography through which sustainable citizenship is being forged is limiting the full geographical potential of this mode of citizenship. In this context, we feel that it is important that sustainable citizenship in Wales and beyond be developed in a range of different spaces within the state and civil society—from the home to the school; from the community garden to the workplace; from the commune to the parliament. In making this claim, we recognize that there is no genuine, unadulterated political space from which a somehow purer form of the sustainable citizen can properly emerge. All modes and expressions of citizenship represent complex mixtures of the spaces and practices of both the state and civil society (cf. Brown, 1997, p. 119). However, it seems only right that if the full relational characteristics of the sustainable citizen are to be released sustainable

citizenship should be allowed to develop and flourish within a range of different geographical spaces and ecological contexts located at a range of distances from the state.

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### **Notes**

1 This document was produced by the ACCAC on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government Panel on Education and Sustainable Development and the Welsh Assembly Government Working Group on Global Citizenship.

2 The Education for Sustainable Development Panel in Wales has been one of the key partners involved in developing the sustainable development and global citizenship curriculum.

3 The programme of citizenship study which currently runs through the English National Curriculum is non-statutory at Key Stages 1 and 2 (pupils aged 4–11), but is now a statutory requirement at Key Stages 3 and 4 (pupils aged 12–19).

4 In this context it is interesting to note that the Welsh Assembly Government sent a delegation to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg in 2002. This delegation went to the World Summit despite a British state delegation also being present.

5 For an interesting and timely review of contemporary work and thinking on ecological and environmental citizenship, see the special issue of *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2005.

6 This research is based upon interviews with representatives of the Welsh Assembly Government Panel on Education for Sustainable Development; the Welsh Assembly Government Working Group on Global Citizenship; ACCAC; OXFAM Cymru; and school teachers. We also held a focus group for students participating in the sustainable citizenship education programme and attended conferences which were organized by the Council for Education and World Citizenship and the Welsh Youth Forum for Sustainable Development.

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